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'Beyond the Hills' finds the devil in ignorance, fear

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NCR Today

In "Beyond the Hills," a young woman, Alina (Cristina Flutur), returns home to Romania after living and working in Germany for several years. She visits her childhood friend Voichita (Cosmina Stratan), who is a novice in a Greek Orthodox monastery in a remote area. Both women were raised in a state orphanage and seem to have had an intimate relationship in their teen years that Alina now wants to rekindle. Voichita, however, wants to be kind but is focused on dedicating her life to God and others.

Voichita asks the Mother Superior and the father who founded the monastery if Alina can stay for a bit. They agree, and she shares her friend's small room. But Alina soon begins to show signs of instability. One day, she has a fit, and the nuns and priest take her to the hospital. She is soon released into the monastery's care. As the days go by, the priest and some of the nuns believe Alina is possessed, and they restrain her in order to carry out an exorcism ritual, to drastic effect. The priest and some of the nuns are arrested and charged in Alina's death.

Director/writer Cristian Mungiu's stark tale is based on true events that occurred in 2005 and on fictional novels of Tatiana Niculescu Bran. While Mungiu respects the basic details of the event -- such as the binding of Alina to what looks like a cross, gagging her and locking her in a room -- his script is fictional.

Mungiu describes his story as one that is not judgmental, and he tries not to identify guilty parties. Instead he added "layers of meaning. The film still speaks about guilt but is more concerned with love and choices, with the things people do in the name of their beliefs, the difficulty in telling good from bad, (the problem with) understanding religion literally, and indifference being an even greater sin than

intolerance."

Rather than the "standard" exorcism movie ("The Exorcist"; "The Exorcism of Emily Rose"; "The Rite") that deal with demonic possession, "Beyond the Hills" examines the simplistic, if not primitive, theology of people of goodwill that find explanations for the unknown by blaming the devil.

Certainly, the first response by the monastery leadership is to take Alina to a hospital, but soon enough it gets complicated. The nuns are suspicious of the relationship between the two friends, and they (and the priest) are unfamiliar with mental illness as well. The nuns and priest are not unlike isolated people throughout history who try to make sense of the world with the limited resources of their experience and little education in theology and the sciences. They do not question their assumptions or beliefs, and this becomes their undoing.

Where is the devil in "Beyond the Hills"? To me, the devil is in ignorance, sexual abuse (when the girls were in the orphanage), unquestioning obedience and, most of all, fear: fear of a God they did not understand because their god was made in their own image and likeness; fear of the relationship between the two young women; fear of a devil they did not understand, either.

Overall, it seems no one, even a couple of the nuns who were not so kind, wanted Alina to die. But at the end of the day, no one was willing to stand up for her, either. Voichita tries to help her friend, but even she is conflicted.

That the priest and nuns all go into the police van meekly when the detective comes to investigate Alina's death underscores their confused innocence and an almost cult-like situation in the monastery.

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This is more than an exorcism gone bad, though it does.

The acting is quite good, and the story draws you in almost from the beginning. The crew constructed the monastery, and it is totally believable and reflects the poverty of place as well as the devotion of the priest and nuns. I kept thinking it was guerilla filmmaking because of the handheld camera that can get old, but this time didn't.

There was no comfort in religion here.

"Beyond the Hills" was the official Oscar entry of Romania in the Best Foreign Language Film category. The film won Best Screenplay at Cannes this year, and Flutur and Stratan won Best Actress; it was nominated for the Palme d'Or as well.

The film is for mature audiences in Romanian with English subtitles.

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